



Resource Review

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Review:

This book brings together international perspectives on art, community and environment. It provides accounts of projects done in social locations and landscapes, with a particular emphasis on educational provision.

I am particularly keen on the criticism - both implicit and explicit - of a set of subject areas that can so often go wrong, be misjudged to the point of insult. I was reminded strongly of this when watching the HBO television series *The Wire* (Season 1) which uses a set of public sculptures placed in an urban ghetto community to underscore how art sometimes engages social environments in a romanticised way, often in complete ignorance of the situation on the ground. The results can be patronising, damaging even. The panning shots of crime and drug dealing create a jarring counterpoint to these whimsical objects.

The picture of Marochetti's Duke of Wellington statue in Glasgow with a road cone on its head (perhaps the first real project many art students undertake) signifies in a much more amusing way. But ultimately this shot contains a similarly serious point for those about to do art in any community or landscape: The burden of representation is often very great and sometimes people kick against it. Glen Coutts illuminates these problems usefully in his chapter 'Community Art: What's The Use?' Through an engagement with Glasgow, he sides with the 'process' element of community engagement over the grand reification of bronzes and stone carvings. However, Ray McKenzie's chapter 'Hard Lessons' describes nineteenth century public sculpture and education in Glasgow, essentially echoing Raymond Williams's view of monuments to the great and the good as 'ambivalent'. However, McKenzie's contribution is nuanced, refusing to come down on some crude anti-imperialist rant, it historicizes its subject usefully and points to public sculpture as an embodiment of

egalitarianism and pedagogy. These prismatic, multiple readings of different symbolic objects often emerge across, rather than in, the essays, which makes the whole much more than a sum of its parts.

Engagement with place and community can tend to slip into solipsism and some of the essays here appear to be approaching this on occasion. Not so much in the gutter looking at the stars, but head in the stars not seeing the land. In Timo Jokela's 'A Wanderer in the Landscape' there is too much vague talk of the individual 'in' and 'of' the landscape, merging, fusing with it, and not enough about landscape as a politicized, constructed framework which holds individual figures on it. Jokela does talk of how '...one cannot engage in indefinite ontological reflection...' on landscape and place, and must begin from a concrete standpoint, but ultimately I feel the influence of phenomenology as a theoretical toolkit can sometimes be erosive. There is quite a clear split between urban and rural projects in this sense, the rural ones tending to be a little more 'floaty' than the urban ones. The term 'gravity' is an important one and should be kept in sight at all times. The way in which the life of the other in any landscape is weighted down upon it tends to be forgotten when the emphasis is allowed to shift to the artist and their subjective immersion in place. I interviewed Jeff Nuttall not long before he died, a great exponent – although not always the most ethical – of art within community and environment. Jeff railed at his colleagues in *The People Show* who wanted to be 'ostentatiously free' instead of engaging with the particularities and materialities of site. So gravity also means the weight of representational responsibility to place, but more importantly the people stitched into that place. However, it is worth mentioning that Jeff also had a crackling sense of humour that illuminated the absurd gravities which people are often faced with, another aspect, which shouldn't be dumped in favour of piousness.

The breadth of topics here is impressive: Mark Dawes outlines modes of empowerment and questions of sustainability, whilst Maria Huhmarniemi explores the internet as a tool for community art projects. Her chapter is thoughtful, but ultimately I hope that the direct engagement with place and people doesn't get overlooked. Communities are often communities-in-the-mind, as Ray Pahl has it, but those communities-in-the-mind are always underpinned and lived out in real geographical locations.

But I risk becoming bogged down with micro-critique here. Ultimately, what this book lacks in grounding - and only then occasionally - it gains by offering multiple perspectives on running art projects based on and in communities and landscapes. It balances theory with practice extremely well, the theoretical strands are nearly always used to illustrate or underpin key points regarding the art project, in terms of praxis, doing. The international range of contributors also makes for a rich mix of cultural viewpoints. As a starting point and educational resource it is highly recommended.